
The education (and training) of language testers

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Organisations reveal themselves in different ways, by their products and activities (obviously), by their funding (both sources and investments), by their membership (criteria for and openness to all applicants), by the public currency of their qualifications, by their publications. Most of all perhaps they reveal themselves by the training they provide for new members. This is true at all levels: for children, schools and churches indicate by their curriculum, their examinations and catechism what knowledge (and sometimes behaviour) is expected of new members. Such knowledge may well be deliberately idealised or simplified, in the sense that once adult, members' experience may temper the starkness of the knowledge expected of them when young. Even so, questions to adults about their academic and religious knowledge are likely to find them reverting to the security of their early learning.

Professional bodies (medical doctors, nurses, lawyers, psychologists etc) carefully guard entrance to their membership. They do so by laying down in detail both what training new members should receive and how evidence of successful completion of that training is to be determined. The fact that they do not necessarily themselves carry out either the training or the examining of qualifications indicating successful training completion is of course beside the point. What matters is that these professional bodies exercise total control over both and will cancel the certification of external bodies (such as universities) to carry out the training and/or examining for them if they are found wanting. An aspect of the commitment of professional bodies to the oversight of their members is to be found in the Rules of Conduct, Professional Standards, Codes of Ethics Documents, etc., which are issued to members and to which they are required to conform. Such normative codes lay down guidelines with regard to relations with various stakeholders with whom members come into professional contact.

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (1993) defines a profession (in part) as: 'a calling requiring specialised knowledge and academic preparation' and professionalism as: 'the conduct, aims or qualities that mark a profession or a professional person'.

Following these definitions, it is difficult to separate the 'specialised knowledge' and the 'conduct, aims or qualities that mark a profession or a professional person'. The so-called learned professions typically oversee both. But in the many cases where a profession exists (in the sense of a body of persons engaged in a calling) but where there is no legal authority ensuring that the specialised knowledge is imparted, there is likely to be a call among practitioners (professionals) for the setting up of a non-compulsory association which then takes responsibility for the publication of a set of agreed guidelines, (the 'conduct, aims or qualities that mark a profession or a professional person'), which in effect are a Code of Practice. We might regard attempts at self-regulation of this kind as a bottom-up approach to professionalism, as compared with the top-down, centrally imposed control over both the specialised knowledge and the Code of Practice.

It must be pointed out that with very large and diffuse bodies which aspire to professional status, eg the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Standards statements do in fact offer a measure of control over members. What makes such situations different from the older and more firmly controlled professional bodies is that a body such as the AERA has no authority to control admission, that is to say anyone can practise as an educational researcher, although of course only members of AERA can add the letters to their name. But unless the professional body has the legal right to determine who shall practise the profession (as is the case with doctors and psychologists, for example) then such membership is not essential and may well be unimportant.

I propose, therefore, that we can recognise a profession by at least : (1) the existence of one or more professional association (with the normal spin-offs of journals etc); (2) a Code of Practice for the professional association (or more than one if there is more than one association). Such supportive activity by members of one another and of their profession, as they see it, may lead to greater formalising, the recognition by the State (etc) that entry to the profession should have formal, legal control. The political

importance (as opposed to the moral importance) of Association-formation and of the publishing of the Code of Practice is that it demonstrates seriousness to all stakeholders, including government, which may in due course decide that it is now time to regularise the profession through the legal encoding of the required specialised training.

This is my chief concern in this paper, with the shaping of the knowledge of future members through the training mandated by the professional body to which they wish to belong. Applied linguistics and language testing as professional activities are closer with regard to their professional status to educational research than to Psychology.

Some years ago attempts were made in the U.K. to establish training requirements for applied linguistics, such that entry to the profession would resemble entry to Psychology in that aspirants would need to provide evidence of prescribed courses completed and examinations passed. The attempt collapsed, in part no doubt because it met opposition from the contrary trend of open entry and removal of all gatekeeping, a trend which later became part of the more general politicised anti-positivist movement. But in part the attempt was bound to fail because there was no possibility of persuading governments, officials etc that (a) there was a discrete profession of Applied Linguistics and (b) that only those coming under the control of the recognised professional body should be permitted to practise the profession. We may hazard that to become eligible for such public recognition the activity has to be either a life-and-death activity (eg medicine and possibly psychology) or concerned with ownership of property (eg the law).

What applied linguistics has therefore done is to follow the example of the AERA and lay down ethical guidelines for its members. These can of course be made mandatory for members of a local or national association (though demonstrating that the guidelines have been flouted might not be so easy) but what it can't do is to deny non-members the right to practise applied linguistics.

If difficult for applied linguistics, how much more difficult for the even narrower and smaller 'profession' of language testing, most of whose practitioners are part-time in the business anyway? What has been done is to set up the International Language Testing

Association (ILTA) which has in its turn produced, like AERA, the British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL) and so on, a set of ethical guidelines (ILTA 1997).

What I turn to now is to discuss just what sort of knowledge we can expect those involved in the profession of language testing to have. First, I summarise first a study in which I attempted to probe language testers' perceptions of what they actually do when they are engaged in developing language tests (Davies 1996). My purpose was to examine to what extent their professional knowledge and experience determine their test construction.

The conclusions were as follows:

Language testers are influenced by their peers and by the practical constraints of the task in hand and by the theoretical models under discussion. This indicates a healthy enough profession. But language testers have a hard task to influence other stakeholders, particularly the contracting stakeholders, on whom the only real influences are their own prejudices and personal experiences. All the more reason of course for (a) more professionalising of language testers in order to have and to be seen to have professional training and professional standards; and (b) clearer information about the professional expertise needed for language test construction.

I want now to discuss what sort of knowledge we should expect testers of Language for Specific Purposes to have. We can, of course, distinguish between general proficiency testing and specific purpose testing. General proficiency language testers are likely to possess linguistic knowledge, language skills (fluency in the target language, or access to it through a colleague), measurement and research design skills. In testing languages for specific purposes (LSP), however, language testers are less likely to have knowledge of the specific purpose under test (the content of chemistry, tourism, seed-technology etc). The question I address is what methods can be used to bridge this gap and what contribution can the education/training of language testers make? I shall refer to the Bailey and Brown (1995) survey of language testing training courses.

What is interesting about their very informative report, which gives information about those providing instruction on language testing courses and the students on those courses, is what it does *not*

tell us. The questions provide information about experience in classroom test development, committee work for testing programs, consulting, dissertation research, Language Testing Research Colloquium (LTRC) meetings, program evaluation, rater training, research grants, survey research, TESOL (etc) conferences, test scoring, test analysis, test development, test administration, testing research, working as a testing program director, working with individual language testers, giving and taking tests and writing TOEFL preparation materials. 'Thus', the authors conclude, 'not surprisingly the survey respondents reported having background in both formal education and practical experience related to language assessment.' (Bailey and Brown 1995: 241).

They also provide detailed information about the content of the language testing courses offered by these instructors and they list the text-books used. Again what is of interest is what these lists do not contain. Nowhere is there any reference to specific purpose testing. None of the textbooks deals with the issue of language variety, register, genre or domain.

The language testing course providers who responded to the Bailey and Brown questionnaire (and they point out that the majority were from the USA, which may itself be the reason for the absence of experience, etc., on LSP testing) are well experienced in the construction of general language tests and in their statistical analyses. But there is no indication that they have any background (and certainly they provide no training) in the kind of content analysis that appears to be necessary for LSP testing work. What does this mean? Is it that LSP tests are at bottom no different from general proficiency tests? Is it that all the necessary specialist knowledge comes from the professional adviser (in medicine, engineering, banking etc) or is it that the tester picks up the necessary skills through actual practice in the field?

LSP can be (and often is) narrowly defined. If we look beyond the traditional professional occupations of medicine, law etc at the wide range of uses to which language is put, then we are forced to recognise that testers like teachers do need to specialise. First of all they need to learn other languages, dialects etc (as Shameem and Read's 1996 Fiji Hindi example indicates), a special case of which is sign language. Then they need to specialise in disabilities (again like teachers), as Baker (1996) makes clear. It may of course be that

in these examples the professionalising of the specialised tester is more straightforward (and more acceptable) because it is within language, unlike those hybrid activities of X plus language (where X = medicine, law etc).

Total reliance on the professional expert has its own problems (as Lumley and Brown 1996 indicate). Field-professional experts must engage daily in their regular work-place with colleagues whose language proficiency is in question, but it is not at all clear that they are able to make the necessary holistic and/or analytic judgements in the testing situation. After all, they are not language experts!

What the papers in this volume demonstrate is (a) the importance of good cooperation with professional advisers, (b) the value of some degree of specialising among testers themselves (similar to specialisation among LSP teachers) so that there is learning through doing, and (c) the enduring uncertainty about the status of specific purpose languages.

And here we should give consideration to (a) descriptive linguistic work on varieties which tends to conclude that there are no discrete variety boundaries, (b) experience with tests such as the English Language Testing Service (ELTS) and its successor, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which exhibit a kind of regression towards the mean over time by reducing the number of specialist options, combining, for example, Biology and Medicine, and (c) the lack of serious interest in the North American language testing tradition in LSP testing. We need therefore to consider just how far LSP is an exercise in face validity.

Of course, whether it is or not, there is a real need for some testers to work closely with field professionals (whether or not they, the testers, gain specialist content knowledge) so that the materials selected are accepted as valid by the profession of which they are intended to be representative. It seems clear that the real professionals in LSP testing are language testers. What remains unclear is just what it is they are testing, the extent to which they need to know about both components with which they are professionally involved, language and subject content, or language plus X. On this the evidence is unclear: which gives some pause to any recommendations we may have on the urgent need for language

testers to study medicine, law and all the other specific purposes for which language is used.

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